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Op Ed: West Virginia Must Do More to Support Children

As the state battles the ongoing opioid crisis, West Virginia's institutions, communities and groups are being pushed to new bounds with many taking on expanded roles or missions. We have seen older generations push off retirement to replace gaps in the family structure. Foodbanks, once in service of the neediest, now serve huge swaths of populations. Teachers are being asked to play social worker. Churches now act as rehab facilities.

Face with these new and ever-growing problems, the potential for children to fall through preverbal social safety net grows. At no fault of their own, the people growing up in West Virginia are experiencing higher rates of hardship than any generation before. Many must tackle hunger, homelessness and addiction every day. When young people have to focus their energy on basic survival its obvious other priorities are going to fall by the wayside. We can't expect them to care about homework or studying for that upcoming test crucial to their future.

These students who struggle to meet the grades in school then become less prepared for or do not even attempt to obtain advanced degrees. They miss out on life skills which are crucial in their future careers. Many of these same students lack confidence and support as they navigate today's world almost unsupervised. To preserve the next generation, we must provide more support services and quickly.

There is no silver bullet to fixing the problems the next generation faces. From expanded education options to increase wraparound services, there is a plethora of different policy ideas to better education in West Virginia. One that is being overlooked is funding for our school's extracurricular programs. From band to club sports, these activities help young people hone their skills and interests, as well as keep them around positive group experiences. Keeping these programs funded and school sponsored ensures they remain open to everyone, especially children from low-income families.

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The critical need of such programs is no better exemplified than through the success of our FFA and 4-H chapters. With 6,649 members within 83 local chapters, FFA has reached an all-time high in West Virginia; at a time when our state's population and the national agricultural workforce continue to shrink. The growth clearly cannot be attributed to pure population numbers, something else must be driving membership. Talk to any of your local FFA members about the benefits of being involved and you will realize what the answer is, community.

Kids watch out for one another in FFA and 4-H. The students, not the adults, are the ones who hold everyone accountable. Just like in a herd, if one strays too far away the others wrangle them back in. They see true value they can bring to their communities as they work on supervised agricultural experiences. Most importantly, they are molded into leaders while learning valuable life skills. The leaders of tomorrow are created today through these experiences.

Any good doctor knows we must focus on prevention as well as treatment. Extracurricular activities like FFA and 4-H are building a sense of a community while teaching life-skills. They are also inspiring students to use their free time wisely by focusing on goals that will better their lives down the road. These programs are helping fill crucial gaps in the community and family structures of our state. It is time West Virginia does its part to support these activities by properly funding these types of programs. We owe it to our children.

Kent A. Leonhardt

The West Virginia Department of Agriculture protects plant, animal and human health through a variety of scientific, regulatory and consumer protection programs. The Commissioner of Agriculture is one of six statewide elected officials who sits on the Board of Public Works.

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